

Loathing (unadulterated loathing) by foresthearts

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Summary:

Steve Harrington is absolutely perfect, and Billy hates it.

1. The Status Quo

Author's Note:

Yep, I'm entering the world of Harringrove. Let me just make it clear right now that I fully recognize that Billy is awful and this isn't a fic where I pretend like he's a great person with no flaws, or one where he redeems himself really quickly. I'm making sure to say this, because it is told from his perspective, so he might think his reactions are warranted when they really aren't.

I work in a Treatment Center, so I'm drawing from my kids a lot with his motivations and stuff, but he really reminds me of my girls, and my heart goes out to him as a character.

This is purely my own work, all mistakes are my own. Please comment and let me know what you like/don't like, and if you have any questions.

Billy really, really hated Steve Harrington.

He had the guy pegged with one look. Harrington was the exact kind of golden boy a small town like this fawned over. The one that was the captain of every sports team, student council president, perfect girlfriend, all that jazz. Probably smoked weed under the bleachers and thought he was being edgy or whatever. Most definitely had two perfect parents, big house in the suburbs, little sister or brother that worshipped him... the guy had "perfect life" practically stamped all over his forehead.

Billy hated it.

He didn't get why Steve got to have this perfect life, while Billy was stuck with his piece of shit father that liked to make his life hell. He didn't understand. What did Steve have that he didn't have?

He wasn't even that great. He wasn't buff like the other guys, he

wasn't that smart, and he didn't even have that great of a personality. He'd spent his own entire party being a buzz kill to everyone around him. Billy had heard him spend most of the night monitoring people's' alcohol intake like he was their parent. He had this attitude where he thought he was better than everyone else. He spent his days looking down on the world around him, 'cause nobody could be as rich or perfect as he was.

Billy really, really hated him.

So he made it his personal mission to show the kid up. Show everybody that he was much, much better than Steve fucking Harrington. He joined the basketball team and proved he was stronger, better than the pansy-ass Ken doll. He wore his shirt buttoned down and had a new lay every week. He beat the asshole as the keg king. He showed Steve that he was the one who had it all.

And Steve just...didn't seem to care. He just continued on with his life like some grade-A asshole, and acted like Billy wasn't taking his popularity right from under his nose.

It was fucking irritating, is what it was. Here Billy was, beating "King Steve" at everything he did, and Steve didn't even seem to give a shit. He made friends with some losers in the chess club, and acted like they were as good as the popular ones Billy hung out with. It was fucking disconcerting, is what it was.

He was too pretty, too. Sure, when he's first gotten to Indiana, he didn't. Think so. Steve had too big a nose, too big hair, and a huge forehead. He'd wondered for days what girls could possibly see in the guys. But then they were playing basketball, and somehow he'd ended up grabbing Steve's hand to help him up. He was right in the middle of giving some bullshit advice when he looked right into the guy's eyes. And--wow. They were pretty big. Long, eyelashes, too, and...He'd glanced down at his lips, and yeah those were big and soft looking, too. Probably used chapstick, and--

He'd caught himself, of course. He wasn't going down that road again. He wasn't some sort of fag. He was a normal guy who liked girls. Just because Steve Harrington was sort of pretty didn't mean anything. Billy was the epitome of masculinity, and nobody could

even argue that.

He'd let out his tension on the court, scoring point after point until Steve came back, and something in Billy faltered, and he found himself tripping over his own feet and missing every shot. He'd been so very embarrassed to realize how stupid he must look, playing like a girl while Steve was making every shot he took.

Well, until he realized that as per usual, King Steve didn't notice at all. He had some sort of puzzled frown on his face, and didn't even really talk to his team as they congratulated him on their come from behind victory.

Billy even went up and shook Steve's hand, but Steve didn't even look at him directly as he distractedly shook his hand and looked out somewhere in the middle distance.

Billy really hated Steve Harrington.

In school, he found himself watching Steve casually, looked on as Steve revealed himself to be some sort of white knight character that liked befriending the weak and helpless, stood up to bullies, and paid for Janet Peterson's lunch when she didn't have the money to buy it for herself.

The more Billy watched, the more it became clear that no matter if Billy was the keg king or whatever in his useless little world, Steve was an actual fucking good person, better than Billy could ever hope to be.

At one point, Billy, Tommy and some other guys went out, got smashed and spray painted dicks and boobs all over the general store. It was pointless fun, stuff that teenagers did all the time. The next day, when Billy went to the store to buy a pack of cigs and steal some snacks, he saw King Steve outside, washing the paint off with some middle aged store clerk and one of his chess club friends.

Billy watched with contempt as Steve laughed at something the clerk said and turned back to scrubbing at an enormous pair of tits Billy had painted. Steve didn't even look upset that he was spending his Saturday cleaning other people's shit. He was having fun. Something

boiled up in Billy, mixing with his shame and turning ugly. Before he knew what he was doing, he found himself walking towards Steve, some fresh taunts in his mouth.

“Well, well, well. Look at King Steve. You trying out for citizen of the year, Harrington?”

Steve turned to him, grinning. “You know it.”

And...Billy really wasn't ready for that. Wasn't ready for Steve Harrington's bright grin, looking at him like he was some sort of decent person, or whatever. Without warning, his heart sort of gave one huge thud in his chest, and he felt his palms start to sweat.

“W-well, you sh--”

“You wanna come help?” Steve offered, before Billy could even get out whatever the hell it was he was going to say. Probably saved him from putting his foot in his mouth, but now Billy was a little too uncomfortable with all this. There was something nervous spinning around in his stomach, and his skin felt too tight on him, or something. Steve seemed completely oblivious to this, and fished out a rag for Billy, smiling as he extended his hand, offering it to Billy.

“G-Go to hell, Harrington. Some of us have real tits we wanna touch, not just painty ones.” It was dumb. It was probably the dumbest comeback he had ever given, and the middle aged lady cleaning at Harrington's side burst out laughing.

So now here Billy was. Standing there like an idiot, with Steve looking at him with his big brown eyes full of confusion, and there was some middle aged lady laughing at him. He felt his face get hot, and he stumbled back a step.

“F-Fuck you, grandma!” He shot at the lady, before turning around and looking at his shoes as he stormed back to his car empty handed.

He played Metallica as loud as he could as he sped away, driving to some random street in the middle of the woods. Finding himself in a safe place where no one could see him, he punched his steering wheel, then got out of his car, pacing around.

“You stupid fucking piece of shit.” He said to himself, running a hand through his hair. “You complete fucking idiot. You think he would like your faggot ass? He’s Steve Fucking Harrington, straightest kid in this fucking town. He’s not some messed up piece of shit like you, what are you even thinking?”

He let out a scream, just to let off steam, but only felt more self loathing explode inside him. He pulled at his hair, repeating, “You fucking piece of shit. You stupid, fucking piece of garbage.” Billy began to kick at the leaves and the trees around him. He was nothing but some messed up piece of trash. If Steve knew he’d been the one to spray paint all over that dumb little store...if he knew Billy had made the mess Steve was cleaning up...

Steve’s face, disappointed and hateful filled his mind, and Billy punched the steering wheel once more.

“You fucking piece of trash.”

When Billy finally composed himself, he was ten minutes late to pick up Max from her ballet class, and he sped to try to reach it on time. He found her waiting for him on the sidewalk with some boy that was looking at her like she’d hung the moon or something.

Probably how he looked at Steve, he realized, and he felt his face heat and stomach sink. He got out of his car, looming menacingly over the door, trying to look intimidating. Max jumped, the kid looked at him in fear, and Billy felt like he was strong again. He glared at the boy as Max ran into the car, a sports jacket draped over her leotard and tutu.

When she got inside, he crashed into his own seat, narrowing his eyes at her. “Who was that?”

“Nobody,” She answered, and he had a mental picture of Steve Harrington’s face again. Suddenly, he could see the middle aged lady looking at Steve, asking him who the weird kid had been that had cursed her out. He imagined Steve shrugging and answering.

“Nobody,” he would say, because as hard as Billy has always tried, Steve definitely didn’t know who he was at all. Billy had done

everything to be seen, and Steve had never even once acknowledged him. Billy felt the rage grow in him, and he white-knuckled the steering wheel without realizing it.

“It’s true!” Max hurriedly said. “We have a...project in school we’re working on, but that’s it.”

She was lying. It was so obvious, he felt insulted. “You calling me dumb, Max?”

“What?”

“I asked, are you calling me dumb?” Billy gritted through his teeth. “You’re not a good liar, Maxine.”

“I’m not--”

“Shut UP!” Billy shouted, sick of all this bullshit. “Just shut the fuck up and let me drive! I don’t want to hear your excuses, I just want you to stay away from him!”

Billy turned the music up so she couldn’t argue anymore, and hit the gas as hard as he could. Flying down the street at seventy miles per hour, reason began to slowly filter back into him. Okay, so he didn’t actually have a problem with the kid himself. He didn’t even know him. But he hated fucking Steve Harrington, hated that he definitely thought of Billy as a nobody, and hated that his dumb kid sister thought she could lie to his face without being caught. He hated that she would probably snitch to her mom that Billy had left her waiting, and he’d be stuck with hell to pay tonight. Most of all, he hated that he was the kind of washed up loser that would yell at a kid just because she made a new friend. What kind of piece of shit was he? He tapped at the steering wheel aggressively as he forced himself to concentrate on the music. That was it. Just concentrate on the music. Don’t think. Just feel the drums pounding.

When he pulled up to their house, and grabbed hold of Max’s shirt before she got out of the car. He pulled her close to him, so he could give the maximum effect of intimidation. “Listen here, you little brat. You even think of telling your whore mother that I was late, and you can forget about going to your stupid ballet lessons ever again, you

got me?"

Max glared at him as she nodded. Satisfied, he let go of her and let her get out. in the house. He followed her inside, finally stomping up the stairs and flopping back onto his bed. He turned up his stereo as loud as he could, lit a cig, and took a long drag and letting all thoughts of Steve Harrington fly out of his head as he lost himself in the beat of the drums.

It was raining and miserable. Billy's car was in the shop, and Max was off with her little friends somewhere. It was about a five mile walk home, and he didn't have an umbrella. Cursing under his breath, he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, walking as quickly as he could though the downpour.

This was just great. A shitty way to end an absolutely shitty day.

Billy had gotten into a fight with the asshole Vice Principal, and had gotten himself detention for the next three Saturdays in a row, which meant that he had this bullshit slip of paper his dad needed to sign, letting him know exactly how much of a screw up Billy really was. That was going to go over well. Billy snorted and wiped the rain from his cheeks. This was utter shit.

He was in some residential neighborhood when a Beamer pulled over next to him. He looked over in a mix of relief and suspicion, hoping it was somebody to wanted to give him a ride, and not a teacher ready to give him even more shit just for being alive.

The window rolled down after a bit, and Steve Harrington's face came into view. "Hey, you want a ride?"

Wordlessly, Billy nodded, not believing his luck. He quickly opened the door and hopped in, heart pounding and hands twitching. He looked around. So this was what King Steve's car looked like. He glanced into the back, and was surprised to see a dripping, curly haired kid with a soggy cardboard box on his lap in the back seat.

"Who the hell are you?" Billy asked, then winced at his tone. He

softened it up a bit. “You Harrington’s brother?”

“No,” The kid smiled stupidly. “I’m Dustin. Steve’s just giving me a ride home. He’s my friend.”

Billy stared at Steve, and noticed he was similarly soaked. “The hell?”

Steve just shrugged. “I just thought I’d help him out, is all. He’s Nancy’s little brother’s friend.”

“And why are you wet?” Billy asked, knowing it wasn’t the most linear of conversations, but not really caring. “What’s in the box?”

“Kittens.” Dustin grinned. “I saw them as we were driving back, and so we got out and decided to save them! Look, they’re so little and cute!” He turned the box to Billy, and sure enough there were two tiny kittens in the box, one black and one grey. Neither was bigger than his fist, and his heart sort of melted at the sight of them.

Billy turned back to the front, frowning at Steve. “Jesus, do you ever stop?”

“Huh?” Steve asked, glancing away from the road for a second to look at him.

Billy narrowed his eyes at the Steve for a second, before leaning back in his chair. “Whatever.” Figured that Steve would befriend some dorky kid as pure as he was. Figured that Steve would save some kittens on his way home from school, like it wasn’t a big deal at all. Figured that perfect Steve Harrington would see someone walking in the rain and actually stop and give them a ride. Probably just another box to check off in his perfect human checklist.

“Which way is your house?” Steve asked, a little hesitantly. Billy realized he was probably giving off some pretty tense vibes, but he didn’t really feel like stopping any time soon.

Perfect Steve Harrington was going to do his good deeds for the day, drop the kid off wherever he lived, drop Billy off at his empty house full of people that hated him. Then, perfect Steve Harrington would go home to his perfect parents that would coo over the adorable kittens and praise him over his perfect grades and the armful of

awards he'd probably won that day in debate club or whatever. Meanwhile, Billy was going to go home to an empty house. His dad and Susan would probably come back from wherever they spent their time after it was already long into the night, and his dad would be so disgusted with how much of a failure he was, he'd get a load of new bruises for the morning.

"Redfield Lane." He answered, shaking himself from his thoughts.

"Cool!" Dustin said, "That's pretty close to my house."

"I'll drop off Dustin first, if you don't mind. He's a bit closer." Steve said, and Billy nodded.

"Hey, Steve, when are we gonna go find Dart, anyways? Since he hasn't been taking the bait." Dustin asked, and Steve glanced back.

"I have to go shopping first. Tomorrow, maybe?"

Dustin smiled. "Okay, cool. What are we going shopping for?" He paused. "Oooh, do I get a bat, too? That would be so badass!"

"No! No bats for you!" Steve corrected, and Billy sat up, curious about the interaction. Dustin's excitement woke him up for the pity party he'd been having for himself, and he was curious. Why didn't Dustin get a bat? Why did he even want one?

"Who's Dart?" He asked.

Steve and Dustin glanced at each other. "Dustin's dog," Steve finally answered. "He ran away, so Dustin wants me to help look for him. But I need to get some treats for him first. Meat and stuff."

"Oh, cool. I'm pretty good with dogs, actually. Do you want some help?" Billy offered, not really thinking anything of it. People always wanted help with shit like that.

"No! No, uh, sorry. That won't be necessary. I'm sure you have other stuff going on." Steve answered hurriedly.

"No, seriously. I think I have a dog whistle back at my house, too. I can totally help." Billy insisted, getting kind of into the idea. It might

be fun hanging out with King Steve and the kid. And Billy could do this. It was one of the (very few) things he was good at.

Steve looked at Dustin, who looked back at Steve with wide eyes, shaking his head frantically. Steve frowned at Billy, looking reluctant. “Billy...” He started, and Billy wasn’t stupid. He could read the signs. Steve didn’t want him to come. Here he was, offering his help and *Steve didn’t want him to come*. And it wasn’t because Billy wasn’t good at it, it was purely because Steve didn’t like him and didn’t want him around. That...kind of stung.

“Or not. Nevermind. You’re right, I’ve got a lot of stuff going on tomorrow. There’s this bird that’s been hanging off me recently, and I figure it’s about time to lay her and get it out of both of our systems, you know?” He said. He didn’t care. He was Billy Hargrove, and there were plenty of people who wanted his company.

Steve let out a relieved breath, and nodded. “That’s awesome. Yeah, go for it, man.”

Billy nodded, and looked out the window, feeling his gut churn with the rejection. He was so, so fucking stupid. Of course Perfect Steve Harrington wasn’t about to hang out with shitheads like Billy. That was a barrier that was never, ever going to be crossed. When they finally reached his house, Billy shoved his way out the door without so much as a thank you. He slammed the door shut and ran back to his house through the rain, pretending Steve didn’t exist at all.

“You’re welcome, asshole!” He heard Steve call out from behind him and he didn’t turn back, just went inside and slammed the door behind him.

He really, really hated Steve Harrington.

2. Shit Hits the Fan

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for all your really awesome comments!
You guys are great, and I loved hearing what you
thought of it :)

There were two things that Billy wanted to do with his weekend. The first was go looking for a dog with Steve Harrington, citizen of the year. Since that wasn't about to happen, the second was to go up to a club in Lafayette, find some gorgeous lady, and fuck her real good.

What he actually ended up doing was looking for Susan's stupid kid. Somehow, Max had managed to sneak out without him realizing, the little bitch. His asshole old man got angry with him, and as annoying as looking for Max was, getting beat up by his asshole father was worse. So Billy ended up spending his Friday night going door to door, charming middle aged old hags so they'd tell him where his little bitch of a sister was.

Seriously, the more middle aged women he had to talk to the more he imagined the different ways he was going to kill Max when he finally found her.

Sexy Mrs. Wheeler ended up giving him the address to some run down shack, and when he went there, he was sure she'd been pranking him. No way in hell his sister was in this creepy shack. As he got out of his car, though, he saw Max. Perfect. The twerp had a death wish. He was going to have to explain to her exactly why she shouldn't go to murder houses in the middle of the night, and then he was bringing her right back. Susan could fawn over Max all she liked, but Billy was getting out of there. He glanced at his clock. Almost midnight. He did the math in his head, and decided he'd have time to drive up to Lafayette and still pick up some chicks before the night was done. Perfect.

As he got out of his car, he saw a figure walk out of the door, and he would recognize that huge mane anywhere. "Steve Harrington. Am I dreaming, or is that really you?" He asked, trying to hide his surprise.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t cream your pants.” Steve answered, walking up to him. “What do you want?”

“I’m looking for my sister.” he explained, and expected Steve to have some good guy explanation for why there were a bunch of kids hiding out at this murder house at midnight. He trusted Steve, after all. Steve was the perfect guy. Of course Max was here for a reason. About then was when Harrington, perfect Steve Harrington, decided to lie about having a little girl at his house.

Suddenly, flashbacks hit Billy of Emma, her tiny body all slashed up and bloody. He remembered Mr. Simmons getting carted off in handcuffs, the old lady across the street lamenting, “He was such a nice man, though. Always was so kind to the children.”

Before he could stop himself, Steve was on the ground, and he had hands on Lucas Sinclair. Nobody was about to hurt his little sister on his watch. Not perfect Steve, not this kid that’d been following her around like a shadow. The kid kicked him in the balls, and he saw red. He was going to murder him. Sinclair was dead.

“No, you are.” Billy turned around, and Steve punched him right in the jaw. Warm blood flowed from his nose, and Billy laughed at the ridiculousness of it. Perfect Steve Harrington was going to fight him. Perfect Steve, who’d probably never been in a fist fight in his life.

Perfect Steve, who had taken his little sister, and brought her to this creepy cabin in the woods. Emma’s face flashed before his eyes again, and he smashed a plate across Steve’s perfect face. He punched Steve in the face, then, mind full of memories of his precious little sister and what that man had done to her. That piece of absolute shit had-- He punched Steve again, and watched him fall to the floor. He straddled him, letting his fists fly. How dare he. How dare he--

It wasn’t Steve in front of him anymore, it was Mr. Simmons, that horrible, horrible man that had tricked them all into thinking he was so perfect.

Suddenly something hard hit his head, and he turned around, furious. Max glared back at him, a book clenched in her little hands. “You’re going to kill him!” Max protested, hitting Billy with the book once

more. Irritated, he grabbed it, tossing it off to the side.

“You think he doesn’t deserve it?” He shot back, standing up and looming over her.

“For what? For protecting us from you?!” Max shot back, clenching her fists. He had to han it to her, the kid had no fear in her.

“For kidnapping you and--” Billy paused. Wait. Steve had kidnapped her, right? That was why he was hiding out in the woods with a groups of kids, right?

“He didn’t kidnap me! He was babysitting us, you complete moron!” Max yelled. “Then you came in and had to act like some sort of...of...berserker, and he was just trying to protect us!”

“Then why was he lying about you being here?!”

“I asked him to! I told him you’d kill me if you found me here!”

“Well, why would you tell him that?!” Billy yelled back, before shoving a hand through his hair and looking down at Steve, lying bloody on the floor. Okay. Maybe she did have a bit of a point. He sighed deeply, looking away. “So let me get this straight. He wasn’t doing anything shady?”

“Of course not!”

“Why was he babysitting you, though, if he isn’t related to any of you? Couldn’t Nancy or someone do that?” Billy asked, confused.

“Nancy, Jonathan, and Will’s mom all had to take Will to--to...” Max hesitated.

“The hospital!” Some pale kid with dark hair piped up. “He’s really sick, so they all rushed him over there, and left Steve to watch us.”

Max nodded. “Yeah! He was just being nice.”

Billy looked back down at Steve, taking in how bloody and bruised his face was. Billy had done that. Billy had done that because he was a piece of shit that couldn’t even understand how one guy could be

nice. Doing a good thing.

“Shit.” Billy cursed, pulling at his hair and pacing around. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!” Furious at himself, he kicked the refrigerator, almost relishing the bruising pain in his foot when he made contact. The fridge swung open, and something fell on the ground with a heavy thud.

Surprised, Billy backed up, but not before it slimed all over his foot.

“What the hell?” He asked, taking a few more steps back. “What the actual fuck?”

The thing was brown, slimy, and had a head that looked like fucking dumpling.. Billy looked back at the kids, miffed. “The hell is that ugly motherfucker?”

“Um. A school project?” Dustin tried, and Billy fixed him with a glare.

“I’m not stupid, kid. What is that thing?”

The kids looked back and forth between each other, making elaborate expressions. Billy watched as they seemed to have an entire conversation made up of eye squints and little nods. Finally, Dustin spoke up.

“It’s called a Demodog. It’s this thing that came from another dimension. Hawkins Lab opened up a portal to the dimension, and our friend is trying to go in and close it. But there’s gonna be more of those things over there, and so we were gonna go help her.”

Billy stared the kid down for a few long moments. “Is this a prank? Like some sort of candid camera thing?”

“No! No, I swear.” Dustin answered hurriedly.

“Look, we don’t need you to believe us, we just need you to take us to the pumpkin patch.” The pale kid spoke up.

“Huh?” Billy blinked. This was rapidly getting too weird, even for him. “How does that have to do with anything?”

“I mean, if you want to believe us, we’re going there because there’s a huge Mind Flayer, and it has vines that have made their way all around Hawkins. Its heart is over by the pumpkin patch, and we’re going to set fire to it, so we can distract it and save our friend.” The pale kid paused. “If you don’t want to believe us, we want to play a prank on the pumpkin farmer. It won’t take very long, but we need a ride there. Could you help us out?”

“If you don’t, I’ll tell dad you beat up our babysitter.” Max paused, and added, “And I’ll show him your porn stash.”

Billy snorted. “He’s not going to care about that.”

“I mean your Honcho stash.” Max clarified, and Billy sucked in a breath.

“Where did you find that?”

“Under your mattress. It’s really not that original of a hiding place.” Max rolled her eyes. “So, you gonna help us or not?”

“You little shit.” Billy ran a hand through his hair. “Fine. Fine. I’ll drive you to the pumpkin patch for your little prank or whatever. But then you’re going straight home with me, you got that?”

“Deal.” Max nodded, shaking his hand.

Billy looked back at Steve. “You guys got a First Aid Kit somewhere?” He couldn’t undo what he’d done, but at least he could clean it up a bit.

From the time Max’s mom decided to marry the Dick from Hell, and she got his spawn MiniDick in the package, Max had been convinced that her new stepbrother was part demon. In the six months they’d been something masquerading as a family, she hadn’t seen a single good side of MiniDick. Never seen him act nice, not even once. She’d seen him beat guys to a pulp. She’d seen him cut the head off one of her dolls and use the inside to hide drugs. She’d seen him steal lunch money from kids in the hallway. He’d smashed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich all over some kid’s shirt cause they’d been wearing the

same outfit. He'd drawn a dick on another kid's face in permanent marker. He'd shoplifted three whole packages of oreos from some store and not gotten caught. He'd hidden vodka in his water bottle and drunken alcohol in school. But he'd never, ever done anything *nice*.

But here he was, face soft as he meticulously cleaned the blood from Steve's face and wrapped up his injuries as best he could. He was so wrapped up in taking care of Steve, He didn't even pay attention as they snuck four different cans of gasoline, a bat full of nails, a hammer, and a whole bunch of handkerchiefs and goggles into his car. She watched as Billy washed the blood off the rag he was using, soaked it in water, and dabbed at Steve's face some more.

She made her way behind Billy, trying to get close enough to hear whatever he was muttering to himself without catching his attention. She saw him carefully put neosporin on Steve's forehead and cover it in some gauze. He was surprisingly good at this first-aid stuff, and Max wondered idly where he might have learned it.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." she heard him mutter to Steve. "I'm such a piece of shit. I can't believe... I'm sorry. You didn't need any of this, I'm sorry. I fuckin' hate myself, I'm so sorry."

Disconcerted, Max backed up, giving her step-brother some space. What was going on? She'd seen him beat up guys worse than he'd beaten up Steve before. He'd almost killed a guy that had tried to mess with her right before they'd moved. He'd never even expressed guilt over it. But here he was, acting like he'd kicked his favorite puppy or something.

"We're ready." Mike came back into the house, grinning in his lopsided way. Max hurried past Billy, grateful for a distraction from her confusion. Her step-brother nodded, picking Steve up like a bride or something, cradling him against his chest.

"Okay, let's go." Billy said, not letting go of Steve at all.

"You're taking him with us?" Mike blinked, surprised. "But..."

"Shut up and don't argue, kid." Billy answered gruffly. "My car, my

rules.”

Apparently his rules meant that Steve got to sit in the passenger seat, with a pillow propping his head up, while Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max all had to crowd in the back seat.

“I could probably fit in the front there,” Max suggested. “I’m not too big.”

“Shut up, shortstop.” Billy answered, glancing at Steve with worry in his eyes. “I need space.”

Yeah, sure. It had nothing to do with wanting to be close to Steve in case something happened at all. Max rolled her eyes, and elbowed at Mike and Lucas, who were on each side of her, crowding her.

Soon enough, Steve came to. He seemed pretty out of it, slurring his words and everything. “Mmn, where’m I?” He asked, and Billy immediately began rubbing at his arm reassuringly.

“Hey, no worries, man. We’re just driving the kids over to do a prank or whatever, and then I’m taking you home to sleep. Just sit tight, okay?”

Steve moved to sit up. “Hmm? Hargrove? What’re you doin’ here? Where’re you takin’ us?”

“Oh yeah, uh. Sorry ‘bout your face. I thought...anyways, I had the wrong idea about you. In my defense, it did look pretty shady, You hanging out with a bunch of kids in some creepy house.”

“We’re going to explode the Mind Flayer.” Mike piped in helpfully, interrupting Billy’s apology.

Steve jolted in his seat. “We are not!” He frantically looked out the windows, trying to get his bearings.

“Yes we are!” Mike argued.

“And you can’t stop us.” Max added. “So you might as well join us.”

“Billy, turn this car around!” Steve demanded, and Billy only

shrugged.

“No can do, hermano. We’re already almost there.”

Steve grabbed Billy’s arm, turning pleading eyes towards him. “Billy. I don’t know what they told you, but it’s not true. They’re not playing some prank, they’re driving to almost certain death. I can’t let them do that. So please, please turn this car around.”

Billy looked back at Steve, and Max could feel the car begin to slow. Crap. He was falling for it. Max punched Billy in the arm. “Honcho, remember?”

It did the charm. Billy’s face went stony, and he turned back to the road, shaking off Steve’s hand roughly. “Sorry, Steve, I don’t really have a choice.”

Steve turned back to Max. “Are you shitting me? You blackmailed him?”

Max only smirked in response, as Lucas answered defensively, “We had to help El, and he’s the only one with a car.”

Steve turned forward, rubbing a hand over his face and then wincing in pain. “You guys are crazy. I’m babysitting a car full of maniacs.”

Dustin smiled at him, patting his shoulder. “Don’t worry, we got a mask and some goggles for you, too.”

“That doesn’t help!”

“Turn left here!!” Lucas suddenly shouted, and the car swerved as Billy abruptly made his turn, and Steve screamed.

“Dude! Slow down!!”

“Don’t worry ‘bout a thing, Harrington. I got this.” Billy smirked. Soon enough, they were rolling into the pumpkin patch. Max pushed at Mike, urging him to get out of the car quickly. She had been squished in that tiny car and was ready to move out.

They suited up, and Max didn’t really pay any attention to what was

happening between her older brother and Steve until she turned around and saw Billy sitting on the ground and Steve brushing past her to get some goggles.

“What happened to you?” She asked Billy, and he shook his head, growling and getting back up quickly.

“Hey!” He went right up to Steve. “I was just tryin’ to help you, you didn’t have to be a bitch about it.”

“I can walk on my own, thank you very much.” Steve’s voice was prim, but he was still slurring his words, so it kind of ruined the effect. “I don’t need any help from you.”

“Fine. Fine, you know what?” Billy grabbed the nail studded bat before Steve could. “Yeah, you do that. Walk on your own, or whatever, ‘cause you’re too noble and shit to accept help from someone like me. I’m not gonna care. But don’t go begging me for help when some asshole farmer beats your face in.”

As he ranted, he took off his jacket, wrapped his shirt around his face, and put the jacket back on. He shoved the last pair of goggles at Steve and stormed off to Mike and Lucas, who were already making their way into the hole. “All right, twerps, stop right there. This isn’t your show, this is mine, and so you’re going to do whatever I say, got that?”

Mike and Lucas nodded, terrified. Lucas stumbled back for good measure, and ended up falling on his butt. Max raged. Of course Billy was doing this. He always got bossy when he was upset. “Nice going, Steve.” She muttered under her breath.

“Huh?” Steve asked, taken aback. “What’d I do?”

Max only rolled her eyes and lined up with the rest of her friends. She sidled up by Lucas, shooting him a reassuring smile, and was surprised by a sharp pain on her forehead. She blinked, glaring up at Billy when she realized he’d flicked her.

“No romance until you’re eighteen at least, little missy.” His smile was sharp and dangerous, his face only inches from hers. She glanced

at the bat in his hand, wishing it was in her own. She matched her eyes with his, and glared.

“I told you it’s not like that.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m not stupid.” Billy turned to Lucas. “I’m watching you, Sinclair.”

He stood back up to his full height, and looked at Steve for a few moments, an unreadable look on his face.

“Look, kiddos, I don’t know what’s down that hole, but whatever it is, you let me take care of it, okay? I don’t need any of your blood ruining my clothes tonight.” He looked down at the hole, then back to Steve. “Steve, you’re gonna be in the back, got that? I don’t need your pretty face getting messed up any more tonight.”

“The hell I am! If you think for one second--”

“Wait Steve, it does kind of make the most sense, when you think about it.” Dustin cut him off with a tug at his sleeve.

“What? How?” Steve protested, looking around. Max didn’t really get it, either, but Lucas and Mike were both nodding.

“You put the strongest warriors at the front and the back of a party.” Mike answered. “Learned that one in the Naga’s Cave way back in the beginning.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, half the time the monsters attack, it’s from the back. You put a druid back there, and you’re all dead, you know?” Dustin agreed, before catching himself. “We’re talking about D&D. You got that, right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Steve sighed. “Fine, I’ll be in the back, but you even think about bossing me around, I’ll have you flat on your back in a second. Got that, Hargrove?”

Billy flashed him a sleazy smile. “Can’t wait, Harrington.” He turned back to Max, then, readying himself. This was probably one of the

dumber things he'd done, but hell if he was going to stop now. He looked at all the kids, taking in their weird masks and goggles. He locked eyes with Max, and she looked back at him, daring him to give up now. "Okay, kids, let's do this thing."

3. The Heart of Darkness

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for all your wonderful comments, guys! They were so nice, and I loved hearing what you guys thought :)

Billy put on a brave face, but he sure as hell almost pissed his pants when he jumped into the hole and the ground slithered around his feet. He stood up, squinting as his eyes stung. There was something rotten about the air around him, and he readjusted the T-shirt around his nose.

Somehow, the hole opened up into a huge-ass tunnel full of either snakes or vines, Billy wasn't entirely sure. Maybe both. He turned back to the hole, wanting to tell the kids not to come in, but Max was already dropping to his side, two of the other twerps close behind her.

"Okay you little shits, don't touch anything." Billy said, trying to calm his nerves. "If you guys get out of my arm's reach, you're dead, got that? So stay close."

He didn't really pay attention to if they answered, because just then the tunnel sort of moved in the distance, and Billy readied his bat expectantly.

"It's this way." the little pale kid started walking the opposite direction, and Billy swerved around, pulling the kid back by his collar.

"What did I literally just say?!" He demanded, and the kid shrunk back.

"To stay behind you, but I have the map, and--!"

"No buts!" Billy grabbed the map from the kid's hands. "Stay behind me and keep your stupid little mouth shut." The pale kid glared at him, but Billy didn't really care. If the kid thought he was being

intimidating, he was dead wrong.

Billy was good with maps, but this one was drawn by some snot nosed kids, so it was a bit harder than most. He was trying to figure out if they should take the left or right tunnel when a scream came from behind him. He spun around to see the curly haired kid running up to them, with Steve coming up behind him.

“What the hell happened?” He shoved past the kids to lean a hand on Steve. “You okay?”

“Yeah, Dustin got the worst of it. Some creepy mouth shot some spores at us.” Steve was crying, nose running and mouth swollen. He wiped at his face, spitting onto the ground. Billy stared at his mouth for a few seconds too long, and was caught off guard when Steve suddenly grabbed the bat from his hands. “I’m taking this.”

“What?! No you’re not!” Billy grabbed for the bat, and Steve shoved him with his shoulder.

“No, I am. The kids said it. Half of all attacks are from behind, and Dustin and I just got spored to prove it.” Steve held his ground. “I’m taking the bat.”

Surprised at Steve’s determination, Billy backed down, turning to Dustin, who was still choking on air. “Hey. Hey, Kid.” He shook the hyperventilating kid a bit. “You okay?”

The kid turned panicked eyes on him, coughing up some more spores. “Kid, do it with me. Breathe out, breathe in.” He ordered, and the kid followed his direction, thank god. Dustin coughed up some more of the spores, but soon enough was nodding and wiping at his mouth.

“Okay, okay, I’m good.” He finally nodded. Billy smiled in relief, then turned to Steve.

“You good?” He eyed the bat. “You’re sure about keeping it?”

“Yeah, stop bitching.” Steve waved him off. “Let’s just get a move on. I wanna be out of here as soon as we can.” Billy nodded and began leading the pack of kids once more.

After that, they found the hub without too much difficulty. When they got there, Billy looked around, struck with familiarity for a second. “This is just like that one episode of Star Trek,” He realized, “With the...” He looked over at Steve, who was looking at him like he’d grown a second head. “..nevermind.”

Dustin spoke up, “Nah I got it, man. With the tentacle monster? That episode was the shit.”

“You’re a Trekie?” Steve blinked at him, and Billy raised his shoulders defensively in response.

“Whatever. Comic-con was like three blocks from my house, and half the chicks there wear bikinis and’ll sleep with anyone who isn’t a complete tool.” Billy shrugged. “So I went a few times.”

“Whoa, you’ve gone to comic-con? That’s awesome!” Dustin marvelled. “Did you meet any famous people there?”

“Not really,” Billy shrugged. “Just Douglas Adams.” He grinned in triumph, waiting for the kid to freak out.

Dustin squinted at him, face blank.

“Come on, Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy? Dude! You’ve never read it?” Billy asked, shocked. Dustin shook his head. “Okay, after this, we gotta remedy that. I got two copies at my house. You can borrow one of them.”

Dustin smiled. “Badass.” Billy grinned back. The kid’s smile was kind of infectious.

“Hey, dorks!” Max called out from where she stood, dumping a thing of gasoline in the chamber. “You gonna help us out or just stand there smiling at each other like idiots?”

Billy scowled at her as Dustin goodnaturedly went to spray the walls. Steve had already started, and Billy swaggered up to him. He didn’t have a gas can of his own, so he figured if he just looked busy, that’d be good enough.

“I don’t usually read nerdy books and stuff, you know.” He said casually, desperate for Steve not to think of him as a loser. Steve only shrugged.

“I don’t really mind if you do.” He continued pouring gas, and Billy pulled out a cig, irritated and wanting something to calm him down. He was still fishing his lighter out of his pocket when Steve threw the cigarette to the ground.

“Are you a moron or something?! Don’t light that in here!”

“The fuck?! You’re not my dad, don’t try to tell me what to do!” Billy shot back, getting up in Steve’s face.

“Do you not even see what we’re doing?! This is gasoline! Extremely! Flammable! Gasoline!” Steve shook his can with every word to emphasize his point. “You wanna kill us all?”

Billy pushed him away. “Get out of my face, man.”

“You’re one to talk!” Steve shot back, and shoved Billy’s chest away. “You’re always in my space like some faggot or something!”

Billy snarled at him, the words hitting too close to home. “You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Billy saw Max take the gas can out of Steve’s hand and move to the other side of the room. Smart girl. He turned his attention back to Steve, smirking a bit.

“I mean, it’s pathetic how desperately you want someone to want you.” Billy shrugged, feigning disinterest. “Even turned to hangin’ out with a bunch of kids, just cause you couldn’t find nobody your own age.”

“That’s not--”

“Steve Harrington, ‘King of the School’. What a joke. Your friends don’t want you, your girlfriend doesn’t want you, leads me to thinkin’...what are you even king of?”

Steve threw a punch, and Billy caught it easily. “I wouldn’t do that if

I were you.” Billy smirked. “Didn’t go too well for you the first time.”

Steve snarled at him, and he smiled menacingly back. Suddenly, though, Max was tugging at his sleeve. “Come on, Billy. That’s enough. We’re done here, let’s go.”

“We’re done when I say we’re done.” He shot back.

“No, we’re like actually out of gasoline.” Dustin added from behind her.

“Come on, let’s go.” Sinclair piped up by the entrance. Billy brushed Max’s hand off, stalking away towards the entrance. The rest of them followed him, Steve folding his arms close to himself like a wounded dog. When everyone was out, Billy lit his cigarette, just like he wanted, took a long drag, and threw it into the room.

The vine creature let out an inhuman howl as the room burst into flames. Billy watched in satisfaction a few moments, before nodding and turning around. “Okay, kiddos. Time to go.”

The way back wasn’t as easy as the way there, and pale kid tripped on a vine and almost got eaten by the creature. Steve sort of went ape with the bat then, and Billy watched in awe as the mild-mannered Steve screaming as he beat down on a monster vine. It was...weird? Exciting and surprising, and made Billy wonder if there was more to Steve than being a saint all the time. Something in Billy’s blood began to pump, and his skin began to itch with the need to get into a fight.

When a dumpling dog intercepted them in the passageway, it was almost a relief. “I got this one, guys,” Billy grabbed the bat between Steve’s hands, beginning to walk forward. He was gonna own this motherfu--

“Wait, guys! Trust me.” Dustin protested, actually going up and charming the thing. He called the dumpling thing ‘Dart,’ and Billy spun around to look at Steve.

“That’s...” Steve nodded.

“Dustin’s dog.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “It ate his cat

and escaped, so we were gonna hunt it down. You can see why we didn't want you to get involved."

Billy looked back to where Dustin was bizarrely charming the thing with some chocolate. Dustin turned back to the group, motioning for them to follow, and Billy just stood there, not believing what he just saw.

"You guys are insane." He whispered to Steve. "Totally fucking insane."

Steve only nodded, eyes squinting behind the goggles in a way that made Billy suspect he was smiling. They snuck past the dog, and somehow both he and Steve ended up in the back, brushing shoulders as they tried to plaster themselves against the wall to avoid the creepy dog. Billy had never quite let go of the back, and they held it between them, hands brushing. Billy's heart jumped to his throat in a way that he suspected had nothing to do with the demon dog, and everything to do with Steve's proximity.

When they were past the dog, Billy flinched away, shoving his hands in his pockets and pretending like his face wasn't bright red. It so wasn't the time to be freaking out about being close to Stevie fucking Harrington. Especially not when Harrington already seemed to suspect him.

When they got to the exit, Billy made short work of picking the kids up so they could all get out. Max scrambled out of the tunnel, then Lucas. Mike came third, and Dustin was just beginning to grab the rope when they heard an inhuman howl from the end of the tunnel. Dustin began scrambling up the rope for dear life, and Steve picked up the bat, readying himself for battle.

That was so not on. Billy saw the shadows of the creepy dogs, and knew immediately anyone left in the tunnel was dead meat. He grabbed Steve's hips, dragging him backwards to the rope.

"What the hell?" Steve fought against him, and the bat dropped to the ground as he pushed against Billy.

"Climb!" Billy shouted at him, lifting him up. Steve instinctively

grabbed onto the rope, and Billy grabbed the bat from the ground.

The things were charging at him, and he glanced back at Steve, seeing he wasn't scaling the rope. "Forget about me and fucking climb!" He yelled, just as the first dog reached him. He swatted at it with his bat, and it flew into the wall, but kept running past him. He blinked. The dogs weren't running to him, they were running past.

He looked back at their retreating forms, and then at the tunnel. Nothing seemed to be chasing the dogs, but he wasn't going to risk anything. He slapped at Steve's thigh.

"Climb, man!" Finally, Steve sprung into action, scaling up the rope and back up the hole. Billy climbed up after him, just in time to see his car headlights turn on at their brightest setting. He shielded his eyes, pulling Steve behind him. If they were gonna have to fight his possessed car now, he wanted Steve safely behind him.

"Eleven." Pale kid whispered, and Billy shot a disbelieving look at him, wondering if this kid was possessed, too. There was no other reason Billy could think of that justified the kid spouting out random numbers. Before he could say anything, though, the lights dimmed back to nothing, and they were left to themselves in the creepy pumpkin patch.

"Oh...kay..." Billy looked around. "We're leaving before the Hulk decides to show up, too."

Steve laughed helplessly at that. "Sounds good, Billy." He put a hand on Billy's arm. The bandana was now beneath his chin, and so Billy could see all of Steve's bruises as the other boy smiled at Billy.

And...how could he? Billy had just pummeled his face in, and Steve didn't even seem to care. He was treating Billy like some sort of friend. Skin crawling with the wrongness of it, he shook Steve's hand off, marching to the car without a word.

The drive back to the Byer's house was awkward. The kids all excitedly recounted all of the craziest things in their adventure, talking over each other as they struggled to each tell the most exciting version of it. In the front, Billy and Steve sat in silence. Billy

glanced at Steve.

“Uh, where should I...?”

“The Byer’s house is fine.” Steve answered shortly.

“Which is...?” Billy asked, curious.

“The house you found us in, dipshit.” Steve shot back. Surprised at his harsh tone, Billy turned back to the road, driving silently for awhile, before asking,

“What were you guys doing in there, anyways?” When Steve didn’t immediately answer, Billy continued, “Like what were all those pictures and everything?”

“The pictures were a map of the vines!” Mike announced excitedly.

“Yeah, Will drew them when he was possessed by the Mind Flayer.” Dustin elaborated. “It was really cool, Joyce got it all organized with Hopper, and Bob figured it out.”

“Poor Bob.” Lucas mourned.

“Poor Bob” all the kids agreed, before launching into a convoluted tale of how everything went down. Billy only half listened, distracted by how Steve was slouching in the front seat, silently looking out the window.

“You okay, Harrington?” He asked, voice low as to not disrupt the kids’ storytelling.

“Just peachy.” Steve scowled out the window, and Billy retreated. So, there it was. It made sense that Steve hated him. He’d messed the guy’s face up, after all. There was no coming back from something like that. Steve was going to hate him forever, and he couldn’t even blame him for it.

Billy drove in silence to the Byer’s house, and Steve slammed out of the door as soon as they got there. As the kids piled out, Dustin stopped for a second before getting out.

“Hey, dude.” He started, and Billy looked back at him. “I just...you were really cool in there. Like, it was still pretty shitty what you did to Lucas and Steve, but....you were pretty cool when you were facing down all those dogs.”

“Thanks, kid.” Billy answered.

“Also, I still want to borrow your book, if that’s okay. You can give it to Max, if you want.” Billy nodded, shooting the kid a smile, and Dustin hopped out of the car, smiling back and giving Billy two thumbs up. Max got out of the car, too, moving to the front seat. She waved at her friends from the window, and Billy began driving off. They sat in silence for a little while before Max broke the quiet.

“So...” she started, and he let out a loud sigh.

“You can explain all the crazy in the morning. I’m not really feeling it tonight.” He answered, glancing at where she sat, looking almost painfully small.

She nodded. “Okay, cool.” She glanced at him. “And you can tell me when you started having a crush on Steve.”

The car squealed as he swerved and hit a mailbox. “What?!”

“Our babysitter. Dustin’s friend. You like him.” Max answered matter of factly, like it wasn’t anything. “I don’t really mind, you know, but if you’re gonna try to win him over, you might want to stop trying to punch him out.”

“I’m not--I don’t--”

“I saw your Honcho magazine, remember? I’m not stupid, I know what that means. If I had any doubts, I just had to read the caption. ‘How’s it hanging? Lick this action man’ Why would you want to lick a dude?” Billy started coughing and spluttering, and she looked at him. “Do you like licking guys, Billy?”

“Er--”

“I mean, you obviously like looking at them. But licking seems a little extreme, you know? Are you a dog?”

“Can we please not talk about this?” He begged, and Max shrugged. After a beat, she began talking again, returning to her earlier line of thought.

“I mean, I’m pretty sure Steve is normal, you know. Likes girls and all that. He did date Nancy, after all. But it’s worth a try. What do you have to lose?”

Exactly what Billy had to lose flew through his mind, and he panicked, parking the car right there in the middle of the road. He turned to face her directly. “Listen. No, it is not worth a try. Not even close. I’m not going to do anything, and neither are you. If you breathe a word of this to anyone, even your idiot friends--”

“I’m dead. Yeah, whatever.” Max rolled her eyes, and he grabbed her shirt.

“No, this is serious, Max. Saw one of my buddies after a group of homophobic shitholes got done with him, and I’m not letting that happen to me, you got that? You tell someone, and I will literally be beaten to death. You got that? This is a small town, and small towns hate queers.” He let go of her. “Anyways, don’t tell anyone.” He looked at his lap, hating himself. “I’m not going to do anything about it, so you don’t have to worry.”

“I won’t.” Her voice was small. “I wasn’t going to.”

He looked at her, surprised to see tears forming at the edges of her eyes. She sniffed and wiped them away quickly, before explaining.

“My best friend back home, Maggie, had a big brother.” She started to say. He looked at her, wondering where she was going with it. “She always used to talk about him and I was so, so jealous. I wanted a big brother just like hers. Then my mom told me she was gonna marry Neil, and I’d get a big brother of my very own. I was so excited.” She paused to look at him, and his gut churned.

“Well, sorry to disappoint.”

“You didn’t!” she argued, to his surprise. “Well, at least not at first. You were cool, with your music and car and hair, and all that. I

thought you were really cool. That's why when those boys were messing with me, you're the one I called."

His cheeks flushed, remembering. "You were probably pretty..."

"Yeah." she finished for him. "It was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. And it was all my fault. I couldn't take it." She sighed. "And then we had to move out here, and I hated you so much, but..."

"But?"

"But tonight, when we were going out and burning the thing...I felt like we were, you know, siblings again."

A feeling of wrongness spread through his chest, and thoughts of Emma filled his mind. "I already have a little sister." He snarled, voice firm. "You're not going to replace her."

Max looked at him, confusion in her eyes. "Uh, no you don't. I would've met her by now."

Billy glanced at her before looking up, refusing to cry about it like some pussy. "The old man doesn't talk about her." Oh, man. He was not going to cry about it. "But she was real. She...Dad thinks of you as her replacement, you know. She'd be fifteen this year, if...if she was still around. It's close enough for him, and he's just thrilled about having his daughter back." He face flashed before him, and his voice cracked. "But she's not. She's never going to come back."

Max was silent beside him. "Okay." She finally said, after Billy had a chance to wipe at his eyes and compose himself. "I don't really want to replace her, anyways. I just kind of want to be myself. But could we still be, like, close?" She hesitated. "I mean..."

He knew what she meant. "I don't know." He answered honestly. "I've got a lot of baggage around the word sister, you know. It's not really easy to just throw all that away." He took a deep breath, calming himself back down and pushing memories of Emma away. "But I'll try to be cool about it."

Max nodded. "Thanks." She answered. "Well, it's late..."

Billy didn't need to be told twice. He turned the car back to drive and floored it. There'd be hell to pay for getting her back this late already. No need to make it any later than it already was.

When they got back to the house, Susan draped herself over Max, crying in relief. "Where were you?"

"Amy's house. Sorry. Billy said I couldn't go out, and I got mad and snuck over to her house. I won't do it again."

"You better not! You're grounded, young lady!" Susan cried, giving Max another big hug.

Billy watched on, a slight smile on his face, before locking eyes with Neil, who stood back near the stairs. Billy straightened his shoulders, readying himself for the blow.

His father advanced on him, and Billy flinched a bit as the old man brought his hand into a fist. He relaxed as the fist turned into only a pointed finger. "You lose her one more time--" He warned, and Billy nodded.

"Yes, Sir." He set his jaw. "It won't happen again, sir."

He let out a relieved breath as Neil stepped away from him, giving him the space he needed. He watched as Neil's face went all tender and he moved in to hug Max and Susan. Neil put a hand on Max's shoulder before giving her a hug. When he pulled away, he kept one arm on Max's shoulders and the other on Susan's. They both smiled down at Max, love brimming in their eyes. Jealousy churned in Billy's gut at the sight of the happy family. He ran up to his room, slamming the door.

On his bed, he shoved his face in a pillow and screamed into it. One of these days, he'd leave. Just walk out the door, and his dad would be so happy to be rid of him. He'd leave and their perfect family would be able to continue on, pretending a stain like him never even existed.

But tonight wasn't that night, and instead he found himself drifting off to sleep without even really meaning to.